

**THE CHANGING PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN THE NOVELS  
*SHIRLEY, THE MILL ON THE FLOSS AND SONS AND LOVERS.***

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**AUGUST 2014**



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**The Changing Portrayal of Women in the novels *Shirley*, *The Mill on the Floss* and *Sons and Lovers*.**

**A Thesis**

**Submitted to the Department of English and Humanities**

**Of**

**BRAC University**

**by**

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**In Partial fulfillment of the Requirements**

**for the Degree of**

**Master of Arts in English**

**The Department Of English and Humanities**

**AUGUST 2014**

I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct.

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## Acknowledgment

I wish to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Rukhsana R. Chowdhury for her advice and criticism which guided and helped me in completing this work.

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## **Abstract**

My thesis analyses the women characters in the three novels, *Shirley*, *the Mill on the Floss* and *Sons and Lovers*. The first chapter gives information on the historical background of the Victorian period and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in England in which the novels were written, on the biography of the authors of the novels and clarifies the aim of the study which is to study the reflection of societal mores which affect women.

The following chapters analyze the female characters – Shirley Keeldar, Maggie Tulliver and Clara Dawes – selected for study to see how far they went against social norms and perceptions about women. This chapter provides a general appraisal of each character. The conclusion presents a comparison of these female characters and their attitudes, and asserts that each of them displays a controversial attitude considering the period in which the novels were written. This study looks at women belonging to diverse social classes and statuses having varied intellectual capacities, so it is interesting to see how a patriarchal society successfully represses the women of that society.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

My thesis analyses the female characters in the novels *Shirley*, *The Mill on the Floss* and *Sons and Lovers*. All are written in the Victorian period and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The aim of this thesis is to follow the changes in the portrayal of women and the attitudes of women characters through the 19th into the 20th century. This will be done by evaluating and comparing the depictions of three women characters - Shirley Keeldar, Maggie Tulliver and Clara Dawes - in three different novels from this period - *Shirley* by Charlotte Bronte, *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot and *Sons and Lovers* by D. H. Lawrence. The paper will explore the degree to which they went against the existing social norms and perceptions about women and societal morals.

These three particular novels were chosen for this study because every one of them features a woman character that is controversial in one way or another in her thoughts, actions or both. Clara Dawes in *Sons and Lovers* behaves in a way that goes against all established beliefs in society regarding how a married woman should act – she leaves her husband. Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* and Shirley Keeldar in *Shirley* also display an independence of thought and behavior that does not conform to the norms of the age they live in. Thus these novels are set separately from other novels of the Victorian age which deal with more conservative women and did not specifically treat women's status in society as an important issue. Accordingly, these three works provide a greater wealth of material for investigating how the attitudes and outlook on life of women characters in novels varied over a period of time. To adequately represent this period covered, the first novel is chosen from the first half of the 19th century, the second from the second half, and the last was selected from the beginning of the 20th century.

The Victorian age, beginning in 1837 and lasting until 1901, was a period of massive changes for England, both socially and economically. During this period, the economy grew at a great rate for industrialization; more and more people migrated to the cities for employment and population

also increased. Women and men of the working class were employed in factories as workforce, but under miserable conditions and for too little pay. Class distinctions also became more pronounced, and were dependent on the level of a person's income and degree of nobility. The middle class, which consisted mainly of merchants and businesspeople and their families, earned well and gained power in society. The prosperity of business ventures, which was the reason for the economic growth in the country, also led to a distinction in social spheres of influence. As it was men who dealt with financial matters and anything to do with work, the public sphere was considered as their sphere of influence. The women, meanwhile, were expected to reign supreme in the house and in all domestic matters, so theirs was the private sphere. Women had been and continued to be second-class citizens during this period. Even though Mary Wollstonecraft had written the groundbreaking *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792, stating that women were unable to gain a prominent position in society because their upbringing did not allow them, nothing much had changed. Women did not have the right to vote, and married women virtually did not exist in legal terms. Under British Common Law, they could not own property, have custody of their own children, make a will or seek for legal separation from their husbands except through some male relative like a brother or father. Married women were considered only an extension of their husbands. Women had authority over only domestic matters and doing household duties was what was expected of them. The notion of the “womanly woman” prevalent at this time indicated a woman who excelled at all tasks to be performed in the household such as cooking, sewing, baking, cleaning etc. She was expected to be a sort of “angel in the house”, supply the entire domestic needs of the men in the family and also not to protest or assert herself but always be self-effacing and mild-mannered. Any woman not fitting this description was considered “unwomanly” or “unladylike”. They were called “tainted” or “fallen” women. What were termed as “conduct books”, expounding at length on how women should conduct themselves in society, and how to be the perfect housewife - cook the best meals, manage the household with the highest efficiency and so on. This limiting view of women was universally adopted, not only by men but by the large majority of women as well. It was only in 1882 that married women truly acquired the right to own their own property during marriage with the Married Women's Property Act. Feminism as an ideology was as yet unnamed but gaining momentum throughout the century. This being the case, realistic representations of women's underprivileged situation in society and their response to it began to appear in novels,



mostly written by women though sometimes under pseudonyms. Some of these works also formed a platform for the voicing of ideas about the ideal equality of men and women and the existing inequality in society. After the turn of the century, the suffragette movement – demanding women's right to vote- made it felt, and women became much more active in the political arena, organizing themselves, launching protests and trying to make their voice heard in general. Women were finally given the right to vote in 1918 with the Representation of the People Act. As authors are naturally affected by the circumstances and the era in which they live and often draw from their own experiences while writing and creating characters, the brief biographies of the three novelists is also relevant information for this study.

Charlotte Bronte was born in 1816. She was the child of Maria Branwell Bronte and Patrick Bronte, a clergyman with Irish roots. She spent most of her life in Haworth, of which her father was curate. She lost her mother and two eldest sisters at an early age. Left to her own devices in a lonely environment, she was inspired by the books she read. She along with her siblings Anne created fantasy worlds, which formed the starting point of her future ventures into fiction. Charlotte and Branwell's imaginary country was called Angria. After attending boarding school, Charlotte worked as a governess at different times, an experience she later drew on in her novels.

Charlotte's first novel *The Professor* was rejected by the publishers, because at that time female writer were not encouraged. We don't know about the female writers who wrote at that time. We only concentrate on the great writers. People regarded female writing as not very serious. Her next novel *Jane Eyre* was better received and became a success. Confusion, caused by her sister Anne's publisher claiming that her next novel – *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* - was written by the author of all the 'Bell' novels, forced both to reveal their identity. Charlotte went to London with Anne to prove that they were two separate persons, and the publisher was astonished to find that the 'Bells', who he thought to be a single person and a man at that, were in fact two modest country ladies.

Charlotte started writing her third novel, *Shirley*, in 1847, but during its writing she lost her brother and her sisters, one after the other. The novel was finally published in 1849. Her last novel, published in 1853, was *Villette*. Having refused three offers of marriage earlier, in 1854

she consented to marry her father's curate, Arthur Bell Nicholls; but the marriage did not last long as she died in 1855 from complications caused by pregnancy.

Marian Evans, who later took the pen name George Eliot, was born in 1819 in Warwickshire, near Nuneaton. She grew up on a farm, in companionship with her brother Isaac, towards whom she formed a strong attachment. She went to various boarding schools and acquired a good educational grounding in literature and religion. On her father's retirement, she moved with him to Coventry, where she met Charles and Caroline Bray, both progressive intellectuals. She also educated herself by reading widely and studying Italian and German.

When her father died in 1849, she moved to London, where she met a number of intellectuals, among them Herbert Spencer, the philosopher, and G. H. Lewes, novelist, drama critic and scientist. Lewes was married but separated from his wife, who already had a relationship with another man. They fell in love and decided to set up home together, as they could not marry. This caused wide public anger and separated her from her brother Isaac, who never saw her again. Their relationship lasted until Lewes died in 1878. She wrote her first stories in 1858, collected under the title *Scenes of Clerical Life*. *Adam Bede* was published in 1859, and *The Mill On The Floss* in 1860. She married an old friend, John Cross, a few months before her death in December 1880.

The author of *Sons and Lovers*, David Herbert Lawrence, was born in 1885 in Eastwood, Nottinghamshire. He was the son of a miner and the fourth of five children. He studied at Beauvale Board School and Nottingham High School. He then received training at Nottingham University College to become an elementary schoolteacher. He started working in Croydon as a teacher in 1908, where he witnessed protests by suffragettes first hand. Due to serious illness, he had to give up the profession in 1911. He published his first novel, *The White Peacock*, in 1911. The next year, he eloped with Frieda Weekley to Germany. His second novel, *Sons and Lovers*, was published in 1913. He married Frieda Weekley in 1914. Of the two novels he wrote next, *The Rainbow* was suppressed, and *Women in Love* had to wait three years for a publisher. In the period following the First World War, he and Frieda mainly lived abroad, in Mexico, Australia, Sri Lanka and Sicily. They came back to Europe in 1925. The last novel he wrote, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, was published in 1928. He died in France in 1930.

In this thesis, I want to evaluate how controversial or radical the women characters' attitudes are. The first is the social norms - the unwritten but universally accepted rules about behavior and speech, as well as the actual laws – regarding women. For this study, these will be taken as the conventions that define society's opinions as to what a woman should or should not do how she has to speak and act in certain public situations. Second, is the existing perception about women in society - which is people's expectations of the responsibilities of women and their capability, the way they think, their tendencies – about how they are conceived of in general. The final factor is morals - taken here as the religious and ethical rules that are considered by society to be compulsory for women. Each chapter will end with an evaluation of the woman character in general, which will include a comparison between her and the other women portrayed in the novel.

## CHAPTER 2

### SHIRLEY KEELDAR

Before analyzing the character of Shirley in detail, an outline of the events in *Shirley* is necessary. Caroline Helstone, the niece of the rector of Briarfield, Mr. Helstone, is in love with her cousin Robert Moore, whose mother is Belgian and who has lately come to settle in England with his sister. He, however, does not respond her feelings and is beset by troubles at his mill.

Meanwhile, Shirley Keeldar, a rich heiress who owns an old mansion in the neighborhood called Fieldhead and Moore's mill, comes to live in her family home. She becomes friends with Caroline and tries to help the community by doing charity work. Rioters attack the mill but are finally protect by Moore and some gentlemen of the neighborhood with gunfire. Robert faces financial problem and thinks Shirley has feelings for him. So he proposes marriage to Shirley, and is strongly rejected by her. He goes away to effect the arrest of the gang leader of the riot. Feeling cut off from Robert and losing hope, Caroline falls dangerously ill. She regains some hope when she finds out that Shirley's governess, Mrs. Pryor, is in fact her mother, and is nursed back to health by her.

On his return to Yorkshire, Robert is shot and dangerously wounded. Meanwhile, Shirley's uncle, Mr. Simpson, comes to stay at Fieldhead with his family and with his son's tutor, Louis Moore, Robert's brother. Shirley's uncle wants that, Shirley will marry a rich and establish man. But she and Louis Moore have secretly in love for some time. Finally, Shirley has a big quarrel with her uncle on the subject of marriage, where she tells him that she has chosen Louis Moore, and her uncle leaves with his family subsequently. Afterwards, Shirley and Louis declare their love for one another and decide to get married. Robert, having found time to think his mistakes while improving and freed from his financial difficulties with the cancel of the law preventing trade, also proposes to Caroline. The two couples marry on the same day.

## 2. 1. SOCIAL NORMS

The characters' relations and their conversations are the main reference points for understanding what is considered the social norm in the world of *Shirley*, and to this can be added the narrator's comments. The narrator in *Shirley* at one point makes some general observations about English country ladies, stating that beyond merely conforming to social norms, they themselves are the norm, the representation of all that should be considered proper:

‘In English country ladies there is this point to be remarked. Whether young or old, pretty or plain, dull or sprightly, they all (or almost all) have a certain expression stamped on their features, which seems to say, 'I know - I do not boast of it, but I know that I am the standard of what is proper; let everyone therefore whom I approach, or who approaches me, keep a sharp lookout, for wherein they differ from me – be the same in dress, manner, opinion, principle, or practice - therein they are wrong.' (Shirley: 132)

Shirley Keeldar is the complete opposite of what these ladies are, and rejects society's norms on many issues, as will be shown here, therefore making her automatically 'wrong' from their points of view. The generally accepted view in society that clergymen should always be treated with respect, as figures of authority in the community, is shown off by Shirley on one occasion, in the chapter entitled 'Mr. Donne's Exodus'. When the curate Mr. Donne, who is not described in the novel as having a very friendly character, comes to Fieldhead for a visit and begins to openly degrade Yorkshire and its people in her company, Shirley becomes irritated. Because she has been born and bred in Yorkshire, like generations of her ancestors. She feels very strongly on the subject and turns the curate Mr. Donne out of her house, actually telling him to go away. This, besides going against established behavior to be shown to clergyman, would be believed unladylike by normal standards.

In *Shirley* the social norm was, young women preferred her husband will be established and rich. As in the projected case of Hannah Sykes, a prospective husband's financial situation should be the first consideration, before his age or his nature. The fact that she would be unhappy in such a marriage, as the narrator predicts, it is not important to her parents, whose decisions she would have to take by:

“It is probable [Hannah Sykes] would have married [Helstone] if he had asked her; her parents would have quite approved the match. To them his fifty-five years, his bend-leather heart, could have presented no obstacles; and as he was a rector, held an excellent living, occupied a good house, and was supposed even to have private property (though in that the world was mistaken; every penny of the £5,000 inherited by him from his father had been devoted to the building and endowing of a new church at his native village in Lancashire - for he could show a lordly munificence when he pleased, and if the end was to his liking, never hesitated about making a grand sacrifice to attain it) - her parents, I say, would have delivered Hannah over to his loving kindness and his tender mercies without one scruple; and the second Mrs. Helstone, inverting the natural order of insect existence, would have fluttered through the honeymoon a bright, admired butterfly, and crawled the rest of her days a sordid, trampled worm.” (Shirley: 138)

Shirley also obviously goes against social standards when she refers to herself as a man. Mrs. Pryor rebukes her for doing so, intimating that affecting masculine manners is considered wrong and is something to be avoided. Mrs. Pryor says to Shirley:

“My dear, do not allow that habit of alluding to yourself as a gentleman to be confirmed: it is a strange one. Those who do not know you, hearing you speak thus, would think you affected masculine manners.” (Shirley: 217)

The remarks of Joe Scott, one of Robert Moore's workers, to Caroline and Shirley, prove that the working class adopts the same social norms as others regarding women. According to him, they have not the right to form their own opinions, but even in thought should be led by men, as if they have no capacity to think for themselves:

'Women may exercise [private judgment] as well as men?'  
'Nay: women is to take their husbands' opinion, both in politics  
religion: it's wholesome for them.' (Shirley: 323)

After he makes his views known, both Shirley and Caroline react angrily, saying he should be ashamed. Clearly, they are against such norms as he is supported. Shirley's uncle, Mr. Sympson, comes to Fieldhead with his family, determined to marry her off to advantage – that is to someone of high financial status and good social standing. When she talks of marrying for love,

and belittles her suitor Mr. Wynne, whom she has refused, he calls her language 'unladylike' and her 'unwomanly'. Her uncle and society considers, 'ladylike and womanly' – to accept someone who is fit and established, without further consideration about her happiness.

The majority of the chapter called 'Uncle and Niece' consists of their conversation on the subject of marriage. He keeps insisting on learning whom she plans to marry, if she plans to marry at all, because he suspects that she has rejected a fifth proposal, from Sir Philip Nunnely, a baronet. Shirley is determined to choose for herself in terms of marriage and to claim her right to decide what to do with her own life:

'What are your intentions, Miss Keeldar?'  
'In what respect?'  
'In respect of matrimony.'  
'To be quiet - and to do just as I please.'  
'Just as you please! The words are to the last degree indecorous.'  
(Shirley 512)

When he asks about the sort of man she would choose for a husband, she makes her preference clear, she cannot live with a man who would dictate to her:

'A tyrant would not hold me for a day - not for an hour. I would rebel - break from him – defy him.' (Shirley: 514)

She jokes with him for quite a while, telling him she was once in love with Socrates and other ancient philosophers, and that she is currently in love with Lord Wellington. She also tells him plain and simple 'I disdain your dictatorship.' (Shirley: 517)

During this conversation, she uses phrases men use to belittle women, in a kind of revenge, and her manner of speech finally makes him ask if she's a lady:

'What do you mean? There are certain phrases potent to make my blood boil - improper influence! What old woman's cackle is that?'  
'Are you a young lady?'  
'I am a thousand times better: I am an honest woman, and as such I will be treated.' (Shirley 517)

Her words here show her demand for respect, as an independent and 'honest' woman, and a person who can form her own opinions and act on them. The fact that her uncle says she acknowledges 'no rules – no limitations' confirm that she is going against social norms, which

can be defined as the rules and limitations imposed on her by society. And because she is doing so, at the end of their conversation Mr. Sympson says to Shirley's face, referring to her in third person "She's not proper." (Shirley: 519).

In the scene where she and Louis declare their love for each other, she also breaks the rule by being the first one to put into words a marriage proposal. She says to Moore –

“I do not ask you to take off my shoulders all the cares and duties of property; but I ask you to share the burden. Be my companion through the life; be my guide where I am ignorant: be my master where I am faulty; be my friend always!” (Shirley: 580).

## **2. 2. PERCEPTIONS ABOUT WOMEN**

*Shirley* provides some illustrations about the way society sees women, both by the characters' behavior and reactions and by their openly stated views. The rector, Mr. Helstone, provides the reader with some idea as to men's perceptions in particular. He sees women as inferior to men, as painted dolls to admire. He does not like them to be wise, because then they would have to be taken seriously, treated as reasoning beings and equals. The narrator of the novel describes his ideas:

At heart [Helstone] could not abide sense in women. He liked to see them as silly, as light-headed, as vain, as open to ridicule as possible, because they were then in reality what he held them to be, and wished them to be - inferior, toys to play with, to amuse a vacant hour, and to be thrown away. (Shirley: 138)

His low opinion of women is proved by the way he treats his wife, Mary Cave: He marries her, and then completely ignores her – 'throws her away' - ignore her needs and feelings, and watches as she sad and gone away in misery then dies. He does not even understand why she dies. Shirley's actions and words are of course opposed to such a perception, as she does talk sensibly and logically, and does not stand in a corner like a doll but does as she pleases.



The image of the mermaid, a mythical, mysterious and dangerous female figure of fable, is the subject of a conversation between Caroline and Shirley, where Shirley displays her knowledge of false perceptions in society about women. She states that some men see all women, without exception, as temptresses, terrors and monsters, like the mermaid:

'But, Shirley, she is not like us: we are neither temptress, nor terrors, nor monsters.'  
'Some of our kinds, it is said, are all three. There are men who ascribe to 'woman,' in general, such attributes.' (Shirley: 250)

The words she chooses, such as 'it is said', show that Shirley herself is opposed to this idea and thinks it false. The perception is linked to the notion of the fallen woman mentioned in the Introduction. Because of those notions the society forces on men, they see woman as either an angelic figure or a demon, with no middle ground between the two.

Shirley, as an intelligent woman, observes men's treatment of women and recognizes the perceptions that cause it. When Robert Moore does not inform her of the attack on the mill, even though she owns it, she remarks that men tell women nothing and keeping them completely in the dark about subjects which involve danger. She comes to the conclusion that they see women to have as much capacity for thought as children, and clearly states that she thinks this wrong:

And this is the way men deal with women; still concealing danger from them: thinking, I suppose, to spare them pain. They imagined we little knew where they were to-night: we know they little conjectured where we were. Men, I believe, fancy women's minds something like those of children. Now, that is a mistake... (Shirley: 342).

Her sarcastic language suggests that she also dislikes this situation. By being kept in the dark, she is kept from knowledge of danger like any other woman. In the same speech, she goes on to point out the angel – demon distinction in men's minds mentioned earlier, and criticizes the 'ideal' heroines created by male authors, the false results of their false perceptions:

"If men could see us as we really are, they would be a little amazed; but the cleverest, the acutest men are often under an false impression about women: they do not read them in a true light: they misunderstand them, both for good and evil: their good woman is a queer thing, half doll, half angel; their bad woman

almost always a fiend. Then to hear them fall into joy with each other's creations, worshipping the heroine of such a poem - novel - drama, thinking it fine - divine! Fine and divine it may be, but often quite artificial - false as the rose in my best bonnet there. If I spoke all I think on this point; if I gave my real opinion of some first-rate female characters in first-rate works, where should I be? Dead under a cairn of avenging stones in half-an-hour." (Shirley: 343)

As she claims that she would be stoned to death if she criticized those heroines, she knows that in this case men's perceptions are in fact the perceptions of society in general, as they could move large number of people and not just men to punish her for having such opinions.

### **2. 3. CLASH WITH SOCIETY**

Shirley has her own 'brand' of morality which, it can be argued, has distinctly feminine elements. This is also visible in her unusual religious views, which are a mixture of Christianity and the paganism of Greek mythology. These views concerning creation and woman form a basis for her moral values. She has a unique conception of the first woman, different from the one that is often used to degrade women, which shows Eve as the cause of sending Adam's to hell, as the first one to be deceived and as the one who leads him to sin as well. And she has a feeling of sisterhood with other women, which keeps her from doing anything that she would consider an injustice or insult to them.

Shirley reveals her own version of Eve or nature in a conversation with Caroline. She begins by criticizing Milton's characterization of Eve – she claims he made him too ordinary and simple woman, based on the women around him. According to her, the first woman to be created is a more strong and extraordinary being than Milton would have one believe, a Titan:

'Milton tried to see the first woman; but, Cary, he saw her not.'

'You are bold to say so, Shirley.'

'Not more bold than faithful. It was his cook that he saw; or it was Mrs. Gill, as I have seen her, making custards, in the heat of summer, in the cool dairy, with rose-trees and nasturtiums about the latticed window, preparing a cold collation for the rectors, -

preserves, and 'dulcet creams' - puzzled 'what choice to choose for delicacy best; what order so contrived as not to mix tastes, not well-joined, inelegant; but bring taste after taste, upheld with kindest change."

'All very well too, Shirley.'

'I would beg to remind him that the first men of the earth were Titans, and that Eve was their mother: from her sprang Saturn, Hyperion, Oceanus; she bore Prometheus' ----

'She coveted an apple, and was cheated by a snake: but you have got such a hash of Scripture and mythology into your head that there is no making any sense of you. You have not yet told me what you saw kneeling on those hills.'

'She is very vague and visionary! Come, Shirley, we ought to go into church.'

'Caroline, I will not: I will stay out here with my mother Eve, in these days called Nature. I love her, undying, mighty being!'"  
(Shirley: 315-316)

What Shirley is essentially doing into this conversation with Caroline is essentially rewriting the book of Genesis according to her own vision. The Eve she describes here, gave birth to Saturn, Prometheus, communicate to the Titan Gaia in Greek mythology. Gaia is one of the very first Titans, and is a sort of earth-mother figure, who gives birth to the various elements of nature, like the oceans and the sun. Shirley's Eve appears to be Gaia in everything but name. She is a life-giving, immortal force, not a mortal woman, whose existence is secondary to that of the man's, being made out of his rib. Her existence leads all other life and nourishes it. At the end of her speech Shirley identifies this Eve with Mother Nature.

Shirley's feeling of sisterhood with women and the moral responsibilities become clear when she refuses Robert Moore. She knows that Caroline loves Robert Moore. She also knows if one woman were try to bond a husband by using her charms and deceitful works, then all women would be humiliate by men as artful and cunning. Thus, out of that feeling of sisterhood, she avoids doing from any action that would wrong other women in this way by degrading them.

'You conceived an idea obnoxious to a woman's feelings,' was her answer: 'you have announced it in a fashion revolting to a woman's soul. You insinuate that all the frank kindness I have shown you have been a complicated, a bold, and an immodest man oeuvre to ensnare a husband: you imply that at last you come here out of pity to offer me your hand, because I have courted you. (Shirley: 500)

That is to say, that I am a traitor to all my sisters: that I have acted as no woman can act, without degrading herself and her sex: that I have sought where the incorrupt of my kind naturally scorn and abhor to seek.' (Shirley: 500)

During their quarrel about marriage, Shirley also compares her religious views and morals with her uncle's. It is obvious that they clash. Using scornful language, she emphasizes her uncle's worldliness and mercenary attitude. As evidenced by his opinions about her suitors and her matrimony, he views marriage as a sort of financial contract, or business venture. There is no consideration for love in the way he conceives marriage, only for personal interests and worldly values like wealth. She, however, rejects his morals - she is true to her conscience, herself not to interests, appearances or financial power:

'Mr. Simpson . . . I am sick at heart with all this weak trash: I will bear no more. Your thoughts are not my thoughts, your aims are not my aims, and your gods are not my gods. We do not view things in the same light; we do not measure them by the same standard; we hardly speak in the same tongue. Let us part.'

'It is not,' she resumed, much excited - 'It is not that I hate you; you are a good sort of man: perhaps you mean well in your way; but we cannot suit: we are ever at variance. You annoy me with small meddling, with petty tyranny; you exasperate my temper, and make and keep me passionate. As to your small maxims, your narrow rules, your little prejudices, aversions, dogmas, bundle them off: Mr. Simpson - go, offer them a sacrifice to the deity you worship; I'll none of them: I wash my hands of the lot. I walk by another creed, light, faith, and hope than you.'

'Another creed! I believe she is an infidel.'

'An infidel to your religion; an atheist to your god.'

'An - atheist!!!' (Shirley: 518)

After this conversation, her uncle decides she must not connect with his daughters in case she spoils them with her "loose" morals. She has become a fallen or "tainted" woman in his eyes. As the scene with her uncle shows, Shirley is guided by her own confidences about morality, and refers to no one else as the expert who can inform her about what is moral and what is not.

## 2. 4. COMPARISON WITH OTHER CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL

For the purposes of evaluate Shirley's character as a whole, the novel provides many other characteristics that *Shirley* has. The first important characteristic that should be mentioned is that she has a man's name, because her parents had wanted a son but only had one daughter. At the time, Shirley was a common masculine name, after the publication and circulation of the book; it became a popular name for women ("Shirley" Wikipedia). This is the explanation in the novel when she first makes her appearance:

Shirley Keeldar (she had no Christian name but Shirley: her parents, who had wished to have a son, finding that, after eight years of marriage, Providence had granted them only a daughter, bestowed on her the same masculine family cognomen they would have bestowed on a boy, if with a boy they had been blessed) - Shirley Keeldar was no ugly heiress: she was agreeable to the eye. (Shirley: 211)

Partly influenced by this fact and partly by being the owner of her own estate, she affects masculine manners. For example, the fact that she whistles owns pistols and knows how to use them are some features of her lifestyle that can be termed masculine. Because she owns a mill, she also has an interest in commercial matters, which are generally, believe to be a man's area, and conducts business. She herself states, while talking to Mr. Helstone, that this makes her feel 'gentleman-like':

‘Business! Really the word makes me conscious I am indeed no longer a girl, but quite a woman and something more. I am an esquire! Shirley Keeldar, Esquire, ought to be my style and title. They gave me a man's name; I hold a man's position: it is enough to inspire me with a touch of manhood, and when I see such people as that stately Anglo-Belgian - that Gérard Moore before me, gravely talking to me of business, really I feel quite gentleman-like. You must choose me for your churchwarden, Mr. Helstone, the next time you elect new ones: they ought to make me a magistrate and a captain of yeomanry - Tony Lumpkin's mother was a colonel and his aunt a justice of the peace - why shouldn't I be?’ (Shirley: 213)

Overall, the effect of her actions and words is to confound the roles society has defined between genders, and to raise questions about whether it is possible for a woman to do the things men are expected to do with equal success. This confusion is of course against the ideologies of the period, which placed the woman completely outside the public sphere and the world of business. Shirley has a self-confident, independent character which causes her to see herself as men's equal. Her statement that she sees herself as their social look demonstrates this fact:

“I consider myself not unworthy to be the associate of the best of them - of gentlemen, I mean: though that is saying a great deal.”  
(*Shirley*: 222)

Also, she believes that a woman and not just any man but what she calls ‘a great, good man’ are equally essential, and for that reason not to be submitted to comparison:

‘I would scorn to contend for empire with him, - I would scorn it. Shall my left hand dispute for precedence with my right? - shall my heart quarrel with my pulse? - shall my veins be jealous of the blood which fills them?’ (*Shirley*: 226)

Shirley has her own ideas about marriage as well. She tells Caroline that she would not marry if she thought she was going to be dissatisfied in her husband. She approaches the idea of marriage with a certain judgment and even anxiety. She also shows in the same conversation that she is aware of the limitations marriage would bring – that she cannot walk away from it if it makes her unhappy. In fact, the thought of being trapped in a miserable, boring union is terrible for her to consider. Overall, it is obvious that she does not think of marriage as the peaceful ending to a true romance and that she would not go into it blindly. Besides, she is not a young woman who waits for a husband and ‘dreams’ of getting married, as evidenced by her refusing the proposals of five respectable gentlemen. Instead, she has her own terms and conditions which would have to be met before she chose to marry a man:

‘But, to tell you a secret, if I were convinced that [men] are necessarily and universally different from us - fickle, soon petrifying, unsympathising - I would never marry. I should not like to find out that what I loved did not love me, that it was weary of me, and that whatever effort I might make to please would hereafter be worse than useless, since it was inevitably in its nature

to change and become indifferent. That discovery once made what should I long for? To go away - to remove from a presence where my society gave no pleasure.'

'But you could not, if you were married.'

'No, I could not, - there it is. I could never be my own mistress more. A terrible thought! - It suffocates me! Nothing irks me like the idea of being a burden and a bore, - an inevitable burden, - a ceaseless bore! Now, when I feel my company superfluous, I can comfortably fold my independence round me like a mantle, and drop my pride like a veil, and withdraw to solitude. If married, that could not be.' (Shirley: 223-224)

Shirley's relationship and marriage with Louis Moore exactly depicts women, at that time. She can hardly be called passive in the scene where they declare their love for one another, her final acceptance of Louis' declaration is more like a challenge than agreement: - "Die without me if you will. Live for me if you dare." (Shirley: 578)

She also counters the similes or epithets he uses for her with her own: he calls her leopardess, she calls him Tartar, which is the name of her pet dog, he calls her his pupil, and she calls him master meaning teacher. Neither is she chosen, she rejects the offers of several men who are of higher social and financial status than Louis, who think that they have chosen her. Instead, she chooses for herself, and her choice should also be given significance – She choose a man who sees her duties as a husband as not only protecting, watching over but also helping her. Besides, she is active after her marriage in using her influence in the community to get Louis selected magistrate.

Shirley is a fearless woman as well, a quality which is generally assigned to men. According to Caroline, this is even confirmed by Mr. Helstone, who does not think highly of women, and Shirley admits it herself:

'My uncle, who is not given to speak well of women, says there are not ten thousand men in England as genuinely fearless as you.'

'I am fearless, physically: I am never nervous about danger. I was not startled from self-possession when Mr. Wynne's great red bull rose with a bellow before my face, as I was crossing the cowslip-lea alone, stooped his begrimed, sullen head, and made a run at me'. (Shirley: 267)

Her actions during the attack on Hollow's Mill are a testimony to her fearlessness. She is perfectly prepared to defend herself and Caroline when the rioters pass by the Rectory gates and she stands ready with a pistol in her hand. She then goes to Hollow's Mill with Caroline, shortly after the rioters, to watch what happens. Another aspect of Shirley's character is that she is determined once she makes a decision and not easily intimidated. This is shown by her uncompromising attitude toward any rioters who may harm her property or the people on it:

“At present I am no patrician, nor do I regard the poor around me as plebeians; but if once they violently wrong me or mine, and then presume to dictate to us, I shall quite forget pity for their wretchedness and respect for their poverty, in scorn of their ignorance and wrath at their insolence.” (Shirley: 268)

Shirley is also intelligent and sensitive. She sees the negative outcomes of the set gender roles society has determined for women. She is aware, for example, of the uselessness that women's lives are dishonored into while they live according to those roles and of the waste of their potential.

All these quality make Shirley an exceptional and fascinating woman. Society, and in particular men, with the possible exception of Louis Moore, are unable to understand or make sense of her behavior and words.

Shirley is belonging in the first category. Caroline Helstone, the rector's niece belongs to the second category. She has spent only one year at school and been deprived of a satisfactory education. When she is treated coldly by Robert Moore, whom she loves, she thinks she will never marry and look into philosophical reflections on the purpose of her life, what she is to do with the rest of it, and on being an old maid:

'I shall not be married, it appears,' she continued. 'I suppose, as Robert does not care for me, I shall never have a husband to love, nor little children to take care of. Till lately I had reckoned securely on the duties and affections of wife and mother to occupy my existence. I considered, somehow, as a matter of course, that I was growing up to the ordinary destiny and never troubled myself to seek any other; but now, I perceive plainly, I may have been mistaken. Probably I shall be an old maid. I shall live to see Robert married to someone else, some rich lady: I shall never marry. What was I created for, I wonder? Where is my place in the world?' (Shirley: 190)



Her thoughts clearly show that she is aware of the emptiness of a woman's life if she does not marry, and that this emptiness is caused by her having nothing to do, by society providing her no options to live in her time meaningfully. Yet she feels powerless to do anything to change this, and in the end she does marry and conform to standards.

As a woman who flees from her abusive husband to earn her own living, Mrs. Pryor falls into the third category. The fact that she leaves her child just because the child looks like her husband gives an idea as to how abusive that husband was. She also prefers a hard life working as a governess under an unspoken name to living with her husband, because she has no legal way out. She openly criticizes the lack of existing laws with strong words:

“This world's laws never came near us - never! They were powerless as a rotten bulrush to protect me! - Impotent as idiot babblings to restrain him!” (Shirley: 412)

Rose Yorke also belongs to the third category of those who do act. Even at a young age, she has come to the understanding that women are forced to lead an isolated life and decided that, that is not what she wants for herself. She says as much to Caroline, whose life she sees as a 'slow death':

“I am resolved that my life shall be a life: not a black trance like the toad's, buried in marble; nor a long, slow death like yours in Briarfield Rectory.” (Shirley: 384)

By using a pun on words, she also expresses her opinion that women's talents and potential should not be wasted:

“And if my Master has given me ten talents, my duty is to trade with them, and make them ten talents more. Not in the dust of household drawers shall the coin be interred. I will not deposit it in a broken-spouted tea-pot, and shut it up in a china-closet among tea-things. I will not commit it to your work-table to be smothered in piles of woolen hose. I will not prison it in the linen press to find shrouds among the sheets: and least of all, mother' - (she got up from the floor) - 'least of all will I hide it in a tureen of cold potatoes, to be ranged with bread, butter, pastry, and ham on the shelves of the larder.” (Shirley: 385)

In a look into the future, the narrator shows that Rose actually fulfills her intentions, she is shown as dying in a foreign country. She has apparently lived a real life, acted on her opinions and traveled abroad.

Mrs. Horsfall the nurse is a character who apparently falls into none of these categories. She is what can be called a most 'unwomanly' woman in appearance and behavior: she is like a giantess in size, her behavior is rough and she drinks. In a way she puts Robert Moore in the place of the damsel in distress: he is placed in an unassailable place at the top of the house, protected by a wicked woman and in need of 'rescue'. Mrs. Horsfall is also likened to a dragon:

“In other respects, she was no woman, but a dragon.”(579)

It is necessary as well to compare Shirley to the other women characters who are the subject of this study. One important point to note is that she is not as tired as the other two women. She is not pressured by society to make a marriage that is against her conscience, like Maggie. Neither does she live separated from her husband, trying to earn her own living, and striving for women's rights, like Clara. One cannot judge, therefore, how she would have reacted to such trials. But there is no evidence to suggest that she would not have run away from her husband, or finally resigned herself to death rather than marry against her conscience, or become a suffragette. It is probable that, had her limits been tried like theirs, she would have reacted in the same way under similar circumstances. She is portrayed as a woman who is not like others of her time. She is a strong and independent woman who resists patriarchal norms. But at the end she gets married and submits to her husband as her master.

## CHAPTER 3

### MAGGIE TULLIVER

*The Mill On The Floss* is mainly the tale of Maggie and Tom Tulliver's lives. The two are brother and sister, the children of Mr. Tulliver, who owns Dorlcote Mill, and his wife, Mrs. Tulliver. As a miller, Mr. Tulliver wants Tom to have a good start in life and eventually assume an advantageous position in society, so he sends him to a private tutor. Maggie, meanwhile, stays at home. Mr. Tulliver, as he is in the habit of doing, opens a court case against one of his neighbors, claiming that the neighbor's irrigation is causing loss of waterpower to his mill. When he loses the court case, and learns that the mill has become the property of a man he hates - the opposing side's lawyer, Mr. Wakem - he suffers an attack and becomes injured for a while. He is finally forced to accept operating the mill for Mr. Wakem in return for a salary, but declares his undying enmity for the man, and even has this recorded in the family Bible. Tom, who finds a job with the help of his uncle, also works to help his father regain the mill.

Meanwhile, Maggie decides to follow the path of self-denial after the misfortunes that befell their family. However she secretly furthers her friendship with Philip Wakem, Mr. Wakem's son whom she had first met as Tom's fellow student. Tom learns of their meetings and forbids Maggie to see him again, because of the enmity between their families, also making her promise to stay away from him. Later, Mr. Tulliver attacks Mr. Wakem in anger and fall from his horse. He has a stroke immediately and dies within a few hours. When Maggie is invited by her cousin Lucy to a social gathering where Philip will also be present, she asks Tom to free her of her promise not to see him and Tom gives permission.

During her visits to Lucy's house, Maggie meets Stephen Guest, whom Lucy expects to marry. The two become attracted to one another, although Maggie considers herself engaged to Philip. One day, the two are left alone to go on a boat trip together, when both Lucy and Philip excuse themselves from coming. They go too away that they couldn't back on the same day, and return to town by a different boat, where Stephen refers to her as his 'wife'. He pleads with her to marry him, telling her that their tour will be considered an elopement and that people will expect them to marry. Maggie refuses because she thinks they would be wronging Lucy and Philip, and

leaves Stephen. When word of their tour and it's not resulting in marriage spreads in the town, she is treated coldly and avoid by almost everyone, but most importantly by her brother. The only people who look on her kindly are her mother, Dr. Kenn and Bob Jakin.

One night she sees the flood waters entering Bob's house. She gets hold of one of the boats, and her first thought is to go to the mill to save her mother and brother. When she gets there, she finds only Tom. She takes him into the boat, but it capsizes when it hits a huge piece of machinery carried along by the flood. Brother and sister drown together.

The facts about Eliot's childhood – her closeness with her brother, her growing up on a farm - and later separation from her brother because of her relationship with Lewes, strongly suggest that she drew from her own life and experiences while depicting Maggie. Literary critics also express the same view. Elizabeth Ermarth, draws attention to the parallels in detail between Eliot's life and Maggie's, as well as suggesting a possible motivation she might have had in writing such an end to Maggie's story:

“George Eliot, born the same year as Maggie, left her brother Isaac, who was born the same year as Tom; she left her home of thirty years for London and despite the hard and lonely beginning she never went back. Maggie went back and her fate is the strongest possible argument and justification for doing the opposite: for doing precisely what George Eliot did in leaving her home behind.” (Ermarth, Page: 601)

Abba Woolson, for her part, claims that with Maggie's tale Eliot aims to defend her choice to live with Lewes:

“Nowhere, so far as we know, does she more directly justify her course, unless it is in the novel which is generally recognized as a picture of her early life.” (Woolson 119)

She also states that Maggie's particular situation is an example of a regular pattern seen in other novels by Eliot:

“All [Eliot's] novels are different presentations of this one case – of the superior young woman *versus* society; and though nature and right are both on her side, society always wins.” (Woolson, page: 93)

### 3. 1. SOCIAL NORMS

As in the previous novels, the society depicted in *The Mill on The Floss* also has norms of its own, which it expects all of its members to comply with. Maggie grows up often frustrated by these standards. She feels that they are unjust, but there is usually very little she can do to change things.

One social norm that Maggie becomes familiar with very early on is about education. Boys, as they are expected to be involved in business and public matters when they grow up, are given a comprehensive education. Girls, on the other hand, are not provided with such an opportunity. They receive only a dutiful education, which Eliot calls “shreds and patches of feeble literature and false history” (*The Mill On The Floss*: 235), for a much shorter period of time. It is also worth nothing that the narrator's words here show Eliot's own awareness of the issue. Boys are even taught Latin, which does not have much immediate practical use for them other than giving them a literary background, because it is the tradition.

In spite of this, Maggie shows she is better at understanding Latin than Tom, when she helps him with his homework. She is also strongly aware of the unequal opportunities presented to herself and to her brother, as can be understood from her thoughts:

‘If she had been taught 'real learning and wisdom, such as great men knew' she thought she should have held the secret of life; if she had only books, that she might learn for herself what wise men knew!’ (*The Mill On the Floss*: 234)

She knows that her potential is cast aside by lack of education, that she could have become whatever it was in her to become if she had acquired more learning. Her reading the few books at home, then Tom's course books and later the books Philip brings can be seen as an attempt to rebel against the denial of education. Her personal perspective and society's notions of proper behavior do not agree with one another, as Reynolds and Humble indicate:

“...she continues to act independently and to educate herself; Maggie is unable to reconcile approved behavior with her intellectual and emotional insights.” (Reynolds & Humble 20)

However, any further education for girls is considered unnecessary by accepted norms, as they will not have any need for it in what they are finally meant by society to become: wives and mothers. What they are supposed to learn is how to be a good housewife, how to do household tasks like cooking, cleaning etc. Sewing is one of these tasks. Maggie does not like sewing, for example she calls patchwork 'foolish work' when she is only nine.

Later, when her family is placed in a difficult financial position by her father's bankruptcy, she only does it for economic support to her family and sees it as 'self mortification' (Book 4, Ch. 3). She is clearly not comfortable with the tasks she is expected to fulfill, which are meant as preparation to provide for her future role.

The outer appearance, as well as the behavior of girls is judged according to certain norms. Girls are supposed to look pretty, be clean, wear bonnets and be obedient – like Maggie's cousin Lucy - neither of which Maggie has much intention of doing. She cuts her own hair, for example, because people always comment on how it will not stay smooth. Her mother's sister, Aunt Glegg, criticize her severely for what she has done:

"Fie, for shame!" said aunt Glegg, in her loudest, severest tone of reproof. "Little gells as cut their own hair should be whipped and fed on bread and water,--not come and sit down with their aunts and uncles." (The Mill On The Floss: 58)

Mrs. Glegg's comments make it clear that doing such a thing against norms should bring with it not only the consequence of warning, but also cruel punishment for a child. This makes norms more like a kind of unwritten law, where the punishments for various kinds of crimes are set by general agreement.

Girls are also not expected to speak their minds on important matters, but to keep silent and follow men's judgment. When Maggie goes against this rule and upbraids her aunts and uncles for being unwilling to help her father, Tom says she should be guided by him:

"But it's always the same, Maggie," said Tom, with the little frown he put on when he was about to be justifiably severe. "You're always setting yourself up above me and everyone else, and I've wanted to tell you about it several times. You ought not to have spoken as you did to my uncles and aunts; you should leave it to

me to take care of my mother and you, and not put yourself forward. You think you know better than anyone, but you're almost always wrong. I can judge much better than you can." (The Mill On The Floss: 193)

Maggie tells her mother and Tom that they should not find fault with her father when he loses the mill, and again she tells her father not to have his enmity recorded in the family Bible. She is clearly for speaking her own mind on matters, and telling people what to do if she considers them to be doing wrong.

Maggie is also aware of the restrictions that social norms place upon her as a woman and her powerlessness due to those restrictions, however there is not much that she can do to cure this in practice, except maybe to disobey Tom. Being unable to find employment is one of the limitations imposed by norms. When Tom implies that he shows his affection for his father by working to pay his debts, instead of going against his wishes by meeting with Philip Wakem, she states that she will not submit to him because she cannot work, or because he is her brother. She does not know either of those qualifications as deserves her obedience:

"I have a different way of showing my affection."

"Because you are a man, Tom, and have power, and can do something in the world."

"Then, if you can do nothing, submit to those that can."

"So I will submit to what I acknowledge and feel to be right. I will submit even to what is unreasonable from my father, but I will not submit to it from you. You boast of your virtues as if they purchased you a right to be cruel and unmanly, as you've been to-day. Don't suppose I would give up Philip Wakem in obedience to you. The deformity you insult would make me cling to him and care for him the more." (The Mill On The Floss: 282)

Later, when Maggie asks Tom to release her from her promise not to see Philip again, Tom makes a similar claim that his doing business in the world outside and being more 'worldly-wise' than his sister gives him the authority to judge what is good or bad for her. The narrator of the novel also comments on how in certain instances, like Maggie and Stephen's assumed elopement, public opinion, which is the force that determines social standards, is always female:

"Public opinion, in these cases, is always of the feminine gender,-- not the world, but the world's wife; and she would have seen that

two handsome young people--the gentleman of quite the first family in St. Ogg's--having found themselves in a false position, had been led into a course which, to say the least of it, was highly injudicious, and productive of sad pain and disappointment, especially to that sweet young thing, Miss Deane."(The Mill On The Floss: 397)

This 'world's wife' is in a way the conceptualized form of the English country ladies that Charlotte Brontë's narrator in *Shirley* described. She sees anything differing at all from herself and her values, her standards as wrong; it is similar with Maggie's case. Maggie tries to resist the false public opinion in St. Ogg's against her, to hold on to a place in the community by finding a means to live, but she fails.

### 3. 2. PERCEPTIONS ABOUT WOMEN

There is plenty of evidence in *The Mill on the Floss* about how society in general and men see women, in the characters' stated views on the subject. Maggie's character and behavior, as with the Shirley's character is often at difference with these perceptions. Mr. Tulliver and Mr. Wakem, the lawyer, provide good illustrations as to how men see women. Being a farmer as well as a miller, Mr. Tulliver draws his parallel from among farm animals when talking about Maggie:

"The little un takes after my side, now: she's twice as 'cute as Tom. Too 'cute for a woman, I'm afraid," continued Mr. Tulliver, turning his head dubiously first on one side and then on the other. "It's no mischief much while she's a little un; but an over-'cute woman's no better nor a long-tailed sheep, -- she'll fetch none the bigger price for that." (The Mill On The Floss: 12)

He apparently sees women as comparable to sheep to be sold, as a sort of ownership. The fact that he makes this comparison about his daughter gives an indication to her worth in his eyes. He also thinks that women should not be too intelligent:

"A woman's no business wi' being so clever; it'll turn to trouble, I doubt."(The Mill On The Floss: 16)



The lawyer, Mr. Wakem, is more educated than Mr. Tulliver. However, this does not stop him from entertaining a low opinion of women. He also sees women as a kind of property or commodity, and their closest male relatives are their owners. This can be understood plainly from his words to his son Philip, when Philip states that he wants to marry Maggie:

“We don't ask what a woman does; we ask whom she belongs to. It's altogether a degrading thing to you, to think of marrying old Tulliver's daughter.” (The Mill On The Floss: 336)

Mr. Glegg's – Aunt Glegg's husband's- views on the subject, as reported by the narrator, are somewhat better than those of the previous two. He relies more on religion and on the account given in Genesis of woman's creation. He thinks women are creatures made out of a man's rib, have 'contrary' nature and their chief duties is doing household work – making pastry, rolling napkins etc:

“And his second subject of meditation was the "contrariness" of the female mind, as typically exhibited in Mrs. Glegg. That a creature made--in a genealogical sense--out of a man's rib, and in this particular case maintained in the highest respectability without any trouble of her own, should be normally in a state of contradiction to the blindest propositions and even to the most accommodating concessions, was a mystery in the scheme of things to which he had often in vain sought a clue in the early chapters of Genesis. (The Mill On The Floss: 102)

In answer to a question of Tom's, the decision of his tutor, Mr. Stelling, about women's intelligence is that their understanding is superficial, although women are punctual. He claims that they could never study or work at anything in depth:

"Mr. Stelling," [Maggie] said, that same evening when they were in the drawing-room, “couldn't I do Euclid, and all Tom's lessons, if you were to teach me instead of him?"

"No, you couldn't," said Tom, indignantly. "Girls can't do Euclid; can they, sir?"

"They can pick up a little of everything, I dare say," said Mr. Stelling. "They've a great deal of superficial cleverness; but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow." ( The Mill On The Floss: 126)

When Tom makes fun of her on this subject later, she feels sad, as if Mr. Stelling's pronouncement has doomed her in some way. Maggie is faced with a 'destiny' that is essentially created by fixed

ideas like Mr. Stelling's, the basis for which is questionable. Although she does not like to accept this view, there is really no way open to her in which she can prove otherwise. Again, Tom's words on her becoming a clever woman show that it may not be such a desirable thing after all – he claims it will likely make her a conceitful person and an object of hate:

"Well, *you'll* be a woman some day," said Tom, "so you needn't talk."

"But I shall be a *clever* woman," said Maggie with a toss.

"Oh, I dare say, and a nasty, conceited thing. Everybody'll hate you." (The Mill On The Floss: 122)

As demonstrated by Mr. Glegg's thoughts on women and on his wife, which were touched on earlier, Mrs. Glegg sets her standards of being a woman by how well her housekeeping is. The same is true of her sister, Mrs. Tulliver. They think women must know how to make beautiful elderflower wine. Women must keep their clothes neat and tidy. Women never harm anybody. This demonstrates how women's perceptions of themselves are determined by what they have been taught from an early age about women's duties and place in society.

### 3. 3. SOCIETAL ETHICS

Morals are another matter in which Maggie's and society's perspective often disagree. Maggie has her own innate sense of morality, which is later influenced by her reading of Thomas a Kempis. She is for having pity and compassion for one's fellow mortals when they do wrong, and being aware of one's own faults, not just congratulating oneself on one's virtues. She makes her opinions known when she is talking about Tom's hardness and desire to punish her, after he discovers her and Philip's meetings:

"I don't want to defend myself" said Maggie, still with vehemence; "I know I've been wrong,--often, continually. But yet, sometimes when I have done wrong, it has been because I have feelings that you would be the better for, if you had them. If you were in fault ever, if you had done anything very wrong, I should be sorry for the pain it brought you; I should not want punishment to be heaped on you. But you have always enjoyed punishing me; you have always been hard and cruel to me; even when I was a little girl, and always loved you better than anyone else in the world, you would

let me go crying to bed without forgiving me. You have no pity; you have no sense of your own imperfection and your own sins. It is a sin to be hard; it is not fitting for a mortal, for a Christian. You are nothing but a Pharisee. You thank God for nothing but your own virtues; you think they are great enough to win you everything else. You have not even a vision of feelings by the side of which your shining virtues are mere darkness!" (The Mill On The Floss: 282)

Her boat ride with Stephen and its consequences is another point on which Maggie stands by her own judgment of right and wrong. According to the morals of the town of St. Ogg's, a young woman cannot go on a trip with a gentleman that lasts till the morning, and not be considered as having eloped. Such a situation needs immediate marriage, failing which the young lady's reputation becomes compromised, and she is deemed to be morally in serious error:

"Maggie had returned without a trousseau, without a husband, - in that degraded and outcast condition to which error is well known to lead; and the world's wife, with that fine instinct which is given her for the preservation of Society, saw at once that Miss Tulliver's conduct had been of the most aggravated kind." (The Mill On The Floss: 397)

Maggie does not approve to do as the societies morals say. When Stephen suggests they should get married, she refuses. She follows her own conscience, which is against causing Philip and Lucy pain by wronging them in such a way. She also does not want to be in the position of the woman who stole Lucy's prospective fiancée from her, which shows that she has a feeling of sisterhood with the members of her sex. This is a feeling that prevents her from acting in way that would be particularly hurtful for another woman.

In such a situation like Maggie and Stephen's, society automatically blames the woman, not the man, for being at fault. As the man is believed to be of a higher moral standing normally, he is considered the unfortunate, misled party who was lost by the brave, devious woman:

"It would have been more correct to say that she had been actuated by mere unwomanly boldness and unbridled passion." (The Mill On The Floss: 397)

Finally, the narrator of the novel demonstrates how the world's wife, or public opinion, who sits in judgment on Maggie in this affair, sets itself even above God due to its presumed responsibilities toward society:

“No good could happen to her; it was only to be hoped she would repent, and that God would have mercy on her: He had not the care of society on His hands, as the world's wife had.” (The Mill On The Floss: 398)

After gossip about her trip with Stephen start circulating, Maggie is treated as a fallen woman by the townspeople. Dr. Kenn takes her part and tries to convince people that Maggie was not at fault, Stephen also sends a letter forgiving her of all guilt, but it has no benefit. Dr. Kenn finds the struggle on his hands an impossible one, he tries to find a job for Maggie at St. Ogg's but fails. The conduct of the women of the town also shows clearly how cruel women can be towards one of their own, when they see her as being at fault:

“The ladies of St. Ogg's were not beguiled by any wide speculative conceptions; but they had their favorite abstraction, called Society, which served to make their consciences perfectly easy in doing what satisfied their own egoism,—thinking and speaking the worst of Maggie Tulliver, and turning their backs upon her. (The Mill On The Floss: 409)

This is an example of women siding with society and its harsh rules instead of with a lone, helpless woman in need of support, merely to satisfy their own opinions of themselves. From a feminist point of view it can be said that this amounts to a betrayal of the whole sex.

### **3. 4. COMPARISON WITH OTHER CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL**

A look at Maggie's overall character at this point may give an idea as to why she goes against social norms and disagrees with perceptions about women, what guides her actions and why she fails.

From childhood, Maggie is not what is expected of a girl her age: she is tomboyish, always getting her dress dirty by playing outdoors, she can't tolerate the system of having her hair curled

and her mother cannot keep her in bonnets. In short, she does not fit into the limitations that define what a 'proper' little girl should be. Her physical aspects – having unruly hair, her skin being darker in color than the Dodsons – meet with her aunts' disapproval, as well as her unruly behavior. Judith Mitchell describes her with reference to the ugly duckling story:

“Maggie Tulliver has occasionally been cited as an ugly duckling of literature and possibly as a prototype for George Eliot herself” (Mitchell 20).

Maggie has an affectionate character, but her feelings of affection for her family are not rewarded, especially by Tom. On one occasion, for example, when she hugs Tom and accidentally his wine falls, this is the reaction she receives:

“[Tom] must have been an extreme milksop not to say angrily, "Look there, now!" especially when his resentment was sanctioned, as it was, by general disapprobation of Maggie's behavior.

Why don't you sit still, Maggie? her mother said peevishly.

Little gells mustn't come to see me if they behave in that way, said aunt Pullet.

Why, you're too rough, little miss, said uncle Pullet.

Poor Maggie sat down again, with the music all chased out of her soul, and the seven small demons all in again.” (The Mill On The Floss: 79)

Her display of love for Tom earns rebukes from four people at once, therefore discouraging her from behaving in a similar way again. Her family does not understand her desire for love, which always makes her ready to win their approval, not their reprove. She is most eager to win Tom's affection and cannot bear it when he is displeased with her. For example, when she forgets to feed his rabbits and they die of neglect. Tom is often cruel towards Maggie and withdraws his affection from her when he is disappointed with her behavior. That is injuring her the most. Both the people around her and the environment in which she lives disallow her receiving what her spirit needs:

“Maggie, thirsting for the education which is wasted on her brother Tom, longs also, with passionate ardor, for greater love and sympathy than his colder heart can give. ...Thus her mind craves

instruction, her heart love, and her nature support. All these we find denied her by the circumstances of her lot.” (Woolson, 58)

Maggie is always doing what she feels to be right, without much thought for how her actions may be viewed by others. She is a young woman who speaks her mind when she thinks it necessary, as seen in some of the examples given earlier. Also, when she first refuses Stephen, she does not care for what other people will think of her decision:

“But among her thoughts, what others would say and think of her conduct was hardly present.” (492).

She stands by what she has decided, by her own sense of right and wrong, for as long as possible, and tries to resist being directed by false public opinion about her. The words *resistance*, *determination*, *unswerving* are used to describe her attitude during this period. She refuses to give up easily and leave:

“I will not go away because people say false things of me. They shall learn to retract them. If I must go away at last, because-- because others wish it, I will not go now.” (The Mill On *The Floss*: 402)

Instead, she chooses to continue to live in the surroundings that are familiar to her, even if it has to be in isolation. Maggie is also independent in spirit, if she cannot always be so in fact. After Tom rejects her because she has not married Stephen, she wants to earn her own living and not be dependent on anyone:

“But she was not without practical intentions; the love of independence was too strong an inheritance and a habit for her not to remember that she must get her bread; and when other projects looked vague, she fell back on that of returning to her plain sewing, and so getting enough to pay for her lodging at Bob's. She meant to persuade her mother to return to the Mill by and by, and live with Tom again; and somehow or other she would maintain herself at St. Ogg's. (The Mill On *The Floss*: 399)

Placed in a situation at home where she is neither emotionally nor intellectually satisfied, where her spirit is quiet by her family, her environment and the financial difficulties of her family, she silently protests against her underprivileged circumstance. However her protest is mostly a silent

one, she does not have the power to rebel actively, other than in small ways. Her running away to the gypsies, or meeting in secret with Philip can be seen as such small rebellions.

Maggie's death is in many ways a failure. She fails to truly resist false public opinion; she fails to make a stand for herself before Tom and St. Ogg's, and she fails to continue her existence in cruelty of a disapproving society. For this reason, her fate can be seen as much a cause of dissatisfaction for feminist critics as marriage was shown to be in the previous chapter. This failure is shared by her other heroines, can be seen in a different light. If the reason for the failure is considered, rather than the fact itself, it assumes a more positive aspect. It becomes a means for exposing the root causes leading to it, mainly the unjust social norms and false perceptions in society and points the finger at society as the real culprit that dooms women to disappointment.

It is possible to evaluate Maggie and Tom's actual deaths being the end of the novel as an author's compromise between social convention and her subjective feelings. Death is probably also the only way left for Maggie to be free, as she does not want to leave the places and people she knows, and as no one in St. Ogg's is willing to give her a job to keep up herself. She really has no options left, no means for living independently, when the flood comes. So death can be seen as representative of freedom for her.

A comparison between Maggie and the other women characters shows that there is really only one prototype for the rest of the women in the novel. And that is the type of woman belonging to the category of those who conform to society's standards. All of Maggie's aunts and Lucy fit into this description. Lucy, in outward appearance and behavior, is correct in every way, the image of the proper young lady - never getting her clothes dirty or treat in naughty behavior, her hair always in place. Mrs. Tulliver even regrets that she is not her daughter, instead of Maggie.

The Dodson sisters - Aunts Pullett, Glegg and Deane – can be considered the standard of what is proper for married ladies. Household duties and womanly concerns such as following the latest fashion in bonnets, having the best lace etc. are all that interest them. Mrs. Glegg, for example, criticizes Mrs. Tulliver for having 'unmatronly' curls and tells her when she should serve dinner and what food would be more 'becoming' for her to serve, for the purpose of economizing. When their sister's husband faces bankruptcy, the three find it most regrettable that the linen with their

family name embroidered on it will have to be sold, as well as Mrs. Tulliver's china. Such behavior makes them fit to be termed “textbook cases”, if the conduct books for women published in the 19th century were to be taken as textbooks for womanhood.

Maggie's father's only sister, Mrs. Moss, on the other hand, is also an epitome of womankind in another way. She is the image of fertility, a kind of earth mother figure, with her eight children. Although not happy with the financial and physical difficulty of looking after so many children, she sees it as her lot in life and is resigned.

Thus, there are only two comparable types of women in *The Mill on the Floss*. One is Maggie, who is aware of the restrictions placed upon her by society but cannot act on this awareness, except for her passive resistance to marriage. And the second is all the rest, who conform, they obey the rule. This makes *The Mill on The Floss* the only novel among those analyzed in this study that does not include women of the third category, who act to resist the injustices of social norms. It tells instead of women that one would be more likely to come across in real life in the England of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the large majority who would not or could not rebel.



## CHAPTER 4

### CLARA DAWES

'*Sons and lovers*' is totally different from other two novels. Before analyze Clara's character, the major events in the plot of *Sons and Lovers* need to be considered. The novel starts with the marriage of Gertrude and Walter Morel. Gertrude, who comes from a middle-class family, meets Morel at a Christmas party. She is charmed by his different aura and fine dancing, he is fascinated with her because she is a real lady, and they get married. However, Mrs. Morel soon becomes dissatisfied with the financial difficulties of being a miner's wife and with Morel's roughness of manner, and regrets her decision to marry him. They have four children, William, Annie, Paul and Arthur. As the children grow up, Mrs. Morel's life becomes more and more of a trial for her. Her husband drinks and wastes the little money he earns in pubs. When she complains of this, he physically abuses her. Their children, especially William and Paul, grow up hating their father for what he has done to their mother. To fulfill herself through her children's success in life becomes Mrs. Morel's only hope and purpose. As William enters adulthood he slowly rises in the world of business and eventually finds a job in London. He also finds a girlfriend, Lily, of the type his mother approves of, a lady. However, she has nothing to recommend her other than her good looks and pleasing manner, and is too shallow for William. Pushed into a corner about Lily and overworked, William catches pneumonia and dies. Paul becomes Mrs. Morel's next source of hope.

Paul often visits Willey Farm, the home of some friends of his mother's, and becomes friends with the young people in the family – the sons and the daughter Miriam. He gives her lessons in French and mathematics. Over time, their relationship deepens into love, but of a largely spiritual kind, owing to Miriam's religious character. At the age of fourteen, Paul starts to work at Jordan's Surgical Appliance Factory. He and Miriam eventually have sex years later, because of Paul's desires, but it is not satisfactory for either of them. Paul sees that he does not want to marry and breaks off with Miriam. Meanwhile, he has been introduced to Clara Dawes, a woman who is living apart from her husband and is a member of the suffragette movement. Both are strongly attracted to one another and start having an affair. Mrs. Morel finds out that she has cancer, and after months of illness, Paul and Annie decide to put morphine in her milk and end her pain. She

dies, and later Paul breaks up with Clara, who goes back to her husband, Baxter. Paul is shocked at the death of his mother, but somehow goes on with his life, knowing he has to survive.

As for Lawrence's own ideas and experience of women, which can be assumed to have had some influence on his writing and his women character, his mother was a great influence on him in his early life, like Mrs. Morel is on Paul. She was a woman aware of the inequality between men and women, and frustrated with the existing situation of women in society. He clearly understood that women were mostly weak in many areas of social life, such as the business world or politics, and that they needed to express their annoyance at being hindered in this way. This is probably due to the fact that, in addition to his mother's influence, he also met and became friends with intellectual women who were members of the suffragette movement. This gave him the opportunity to see things from politically active women's perspective. So far as his ideas about the relationship between man and woman are concerned, he did not see man as the superior party and the woman as always put off to him. He rather saw it as a partnership of equals, and acknowledged their differences. His aim is obviously to speak *for* women, even more successfully than women political activists, not against them.

#### **4. 1. SOCIAL NORMS**

The norms of the society Clara Dawes lives in are somewhat different from those in the previous novels, as the novel is set in a different period. The beginning of the twentieth century in England is a time when women had organized themselves politically to demand the right to vote, and this organization – the suffragette movement – and the demonstrations they held on the streets in major cities had become a fact of life. Thus, society put members of this movement in a different category, and judged them by another set of standards, which did not necessarily make going against existing norms acceptable, but can be considered an adaptation to the existence of views totally opposed to it. Paul's conversation with Mrs. Morel after he goes for a walk with Clara indicates this phenomenon. Mrs. Morel is concerned about Clara's reputation, and Paul says there is no reason for her to be:

‘But won’t people talk?’ she said.

‘Why? They know she’s a suffragette, and so on. And what if they do talk!’

‘Of course, there may be nothing wrong in it,’ said his mother.

‘But you know what folks are, and if once she gets talked about—’

(Sons and lovers: 358)

As Clara is known to be a suffragette, it is apparently within the norm of behavior expected from her to 'walk about' with another man, not with her husband. As she tells Paul, she does not regret what she has done and has already shown herself defiant of the existing social standards that would cause people to talk, which is what Paul points out to his mother:

“Well, my dear, she lives separate from her husband, and talks on platforms; so she’s already singled out from the sheep, and, as far as I can see, hasn’t much to lose. No; her life’s nothing to her, so what’s the worth of nothing? She goes with me—it becomes something. Then she must pay—we both must pay! Folk are so frightened of paying; they’d rather starve and die.” (Sons and Lovers: 359)

Clara also has a style of dress – an outward expression of her radical ideas - that goes against the expectations of society. She is not well-groomed and perfectly dressed as considered appropriate for women.

“She wore a large, dowdy hat of black beaver, and a sort of slightly affected simple dress that made her look rather sack-like. She was evidently poor, and had not much taste.” (Sons and Lovers: 223)

Her lifestyle can be seen as offense to the social norms she is actively protesting: she lives separately from her husband, with her mother, works in a factory and for a while at Jordan's; she is the breadwinner in the house. She is politically active and speaks on platforms for women's rights, and later she also goes to live with another man, Paul, while still married. All of these are unacceptable notions for the society she is living in. Something else that would be considered

completely inappropriate by the common people is that she voices her own desires in her relationship with Paul, as Carol Dix alludes to:

“So despite his protestations to Miriam, Paul was not simply attracted to the sensuous woman ... but to the type of woman who had worked out her own place in the world, and was able to express her own sexuality. He needed that, as would any man.”

(Dix 32)

She also certainly plays an important role in Paul's life because she facilitates his sexual growth:

“After all, it was Clara who taught young Paul Morel the ways of the world and he had a lot to admire in her.” (Dix 3)

#### **4. 2. PERCEPTIONS ABOUT WOMEN**

As a member of a movement that fights against unjust or false perceptions about women, especially men's, Clara is well educated about what those perceptions are and opposes them almost militantly at every turn when they are expressed – even when they are not voiced seriously, as is the case with some statements Paul makes to her in the early days of their acquaintance. She fiercely defends a fellow suffragette, for example, when Paul voices his opinion about her:

‘I think she’s a lovable little woman,’ said Paul.

‘Margaret Bonford!’ exclaimed Clara. ‘She’s a great deal cleverer than most men.’

‘Well, I didn’t say she wasn’t,’ he said, deprecating. ‘She’s lovable for all that.’

‘And, of course, that is all that matters,’ said Clara witheringly. He rubbed his head, rather perplexed, and rather annoyed.

‘I suppose it matters more than her cleverness,’ he said; ‘- which, after all, would never get her to heaven.’

‘It’s not heaven she wants to get—it’s her fair share on earth,’ retorted Clara. She spoke as if he were responsible for some deprivation which Miss Bonford suffered.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I thought she was warm, and awfully nice— only too frail. I wished she was sitting comfortably in peace—’  
‘Darning her husband’s stockings,’ said Clara scathingly. (Sons and Lovers: 270)

Clara clearly thinks that all men share the same false ideas about women, such as that they should stay at home doing 'womanly' work like darning stockings, and blames all men for the opportunities women are deprived of. She clears her opposition to such unjust perceptions in more public settings as well, such as in a gathering of family and friends at Willey Farm. During a discussion there she objects to the notion that women should not be equal with men in the labor market and that their work is deserving of less payment because they do not support a family. This passage was cut out of the first publication of the novel by the editor:

“The conversation turned again on the point whether women's wages should be equal with those of men. Mrs. Leivers upheld that men had families to keep, Clara said, so much work should have so much pay, man or woman. Mr. Leivers was inclined to agree with her. Whatever Mrs. Dawes had said, Paul would have taken sides against her. He argued that a woman was only an accessory in the labor market, and that, in the majority of cases she was a transitory thing, supporting herself alone for a year or two. Clara quoted the number of women who supported father, mother, sisters etc.”  
(Sons and Lovers: 273)

She also shows her strong dislike for the perception of woman as a continuous ‘damsel in distresses’ that the knight – the man - has to save and fight for, as someone always in need of protection and not allowed to fight her own battles. This is in reaction to a comment Paul makes when she, Paul and Miriam go for a walk and see a man leading a horse:

‘What a treat to be a knight,’ [Paul] said, ‘and to have a pavilion here.’  
‘And to have us shut up safely?’ replied Clara.  
‘Yes,’ he answered, ‘singing with your maids at your broidery. I would carry your banner of white and green and heliotrope. I would have ‘W.S.P.U.’ emblazoned on my shield, beneath a woman rampant.’  
‘I have no doubt,’ said Clara, ‘that you would much rather fight for a woman than let her fight for herself.’ (Sons and Lovers: 274)

#### 4. 3. CLASH WITH SOCIETY

Clara's actions also indicate that she has her own sense of right and wrong, and that she does not give much weight to society's notions of morality. When her husband treats her brutally and is unfaithful to her and she feels trapped, she thinks herself justified in leaving him although she does not divorce him. Later, when she falls for Paul, she tells him that she does not feel as if she has done something morally wrong in being with him:

“You don't feel criminal, do you?” She looked at him with startled gray eyes. “Criminal!” she said. “No.” when he also asks if she feels they have been sinful, she gives the same answer: ‘ “Not sinners are we?” he said, with an uneasy little frown. “No,” she replied.’ (Sons and Lovers: 358).

Neither does she voice regret and say her actions were wrong later on in their relationship. In terms of society's moral values, the case is just the opposite. Considered from that point of view, and judging by the fact that her simply going for a walk with Paul can cause concern about what people will say, her behavior is completely immoral and sinful, as she is having sex with another man while married, and committing adultery.

Among the women characters studied in this thesis, Clara also is the one who takes to the most extreme point the principle of following one's own morals against all public opinion. None of the other two women even consider having an affair while still married. Shirley considers even a proposal based on financial concerns and false expectations unacceptable. Maggie too, even though she is not officially engaged to Philip, cannot imagine starting a relationship with Stephen and 'wronging' Philip. Thus, probably owing to the fact that she is living at a later time period when society has become somewhat less strict, as well as to her character, Clara takes the most radical stand of them all against the moral values of society.

#### 4. 4. COMPARISON WITH OTHER CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL

Clara's whole character is in many ways influenced by her beliefs about women's rights and her activism. Signs of her defiant character, probably an effect of her being a feminist, can even be seen in the way she carries herself, as the first description of her shows:

“She had scornful grey eyes, a skin like white honey, and a full mouth, with a slightly lifted upper lip that did not know whether it was raised in scorn of all men or out of eagerness to be kissed, but which believed the former. She carried her head back, as if she had drawn away in contempt, perhaps from men also.” (Sons and lovers: 223)

She likes to be independent and do as she satisfies, as is evidenced by earning her own money, leaving her husband when he cheats on her, and choosing to be with Paul. In doing these things, she does not feel anxiety about what people will say or how they will judge her, and she is guided only by her own judgment. She has a sense of self-worth as well, that makes her demand to be treated with respect, which is what she says Paul did not do, when they are breaking up.

As a member of a movement defending women's rights, she also displays a feeling of solidarity and sisterhood for individual women, like Miriam. She defends Miriam to Paul when he complains that Miriam asks too much of him by demanding that they have a kind of spiritual communion, and tries to show him that he does not really understand her:

‘... Something in me shrinks from her like hell—she’s so good, when I’m not good.’  
‘How do you know what she is?’  
‘I do! I know she wants a sort of soul union.’  
‘But how do you know what she wants?’  
‘I’ve been with her for seven years.’  
‘And you haven’t found out the very first thing about her.’  
‘What’s that?’  
‘That she doesn’t want any of your soul communions. That’s your own imagination. She wants you.’  
He pondered over this. Perhaps he was wrong.  
‘But she seems—’ he began.  
‘You’ve never tried,’ she answered. (Sons and lovers: 321)

Again, when he tells her he has broken up with Miriam; Clara asks him if he hasn't treated Miriam badly. She does not only shy from behavior that would be harmful to other women, like Shirley And Maggie, she also actively defends them against men, tries to make them see things from the women's point of view.

If the categorization used in the earlier chapters of this thesis is to be used, then clearly, there are no women characters in *Sons and Lovers* who fall into the same category as Clara. Mrs. Morel is the only one who comes close, but her activity is limited to joining the Women's Guild, where women “discuss the benefits to be derived from cooperation, and other social questions” (69), and reading papers there. She is not involved in any political movement; neither can she do anything other than try to resist her husband's violence, even by offering violence herself, and hope to be fulfilled through her children's success, as she has been disappointed in her marriage.

Miriam Leivers, compared with Clara, also falls into the second category, like Mrs. Morel. At the farm she does all housework – clean, cook, sew etc. and farm work. What is more, she is scolded cruelly by her mother if she does not come up to standard on that. She wants to have a real education and actually do something, other than housework. She knows she has little opportunity to do so because she is a woman, and expresses her frustration to Paul:

‘I want to do something. I want a chance like anybody else.  
Why should I, because I’m a girl, be kept at home and not allowed  
to be anything? What chance *have* I?’  
‘Chance of what?’  
‘Of knowing anything—of learning, of doing anything.  
It’s not fair, because I’m a woman.’(Sons and Lovers: 185)

She is contrasted with her elder sister Agatha, who has become a schoolteacher. She is also somewhat envious of her:

“Agatha, who was fair and small and determined, had rebelled  
against the home atmosphere, against the doctrine of ‘the other  
cheek’. She was out in the world now, in a fair way to be  
independent.” (Sons and lovers: 207).



At the end of the novel, she does manage to make some change in her situation and be like Agatha by going to a farming college, where she has a chance of becoming a teacher.

Annie can also be seen as one of the women who are aware of women's position in society as she also becomes a teacher and start to earn her own living. Mrs. Leivers, on the other hand, who is deeply religious, belongs firmly in the group of those who conform. She even advocates the idea that men should receive more salary than women for doing the same amount of work, because they have families to look after.

Of the characters analyzed in this study, it can be said that Clara is the most radical. She breaks with conservative morality, takes up political activism and strongly defends women's rights. She may not have broken the law; but she certainly defies all social norms and fixed notions about women by her behavior, lifestyle, words and even clothes.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The three novels chosen for this study *Shirley*, *The Mill on the Floss* and *Sons and Lovers* all portray women characters that struggle against unfair norms, illogical perceptions and fixed morals of the society in which they live. They all find a different source of strength for this struggle: Shirley relies on her wealth and estate, Clara on her political belief, while Maggie only has her sense of right and wrong. The difficulties they face are also different: Clara struggle with brutal and wicked husbands, Maggie faces being left without means to live and Shirley has to tackle an uncle who tries to tyrannize her. Chronologically speaking these portrayals of women are not in a progressive order according to the degree of their defiance. Shirley is beyond her time, Maggie constitutes a step back because she ultimately fails, and Clara is a woman of her time.

*Shirley* and *The Mill on The Floss*, what Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot wrote can be seen as the beginnings in literature, of what would transform into feminism. It can be said that these contributions towards literature that dealt with injustices and inequalities suffered by women provide examples for women of later generations, whether they be real women or fictional characters in a novel. Charlotte Bronte tells of a young woman who confounds men with her bravery, her unique religious beliefs and the masculine manners she adopts. But at the end Shirley gets married and submits to her husband as her master. George Eliot tells of the defeat of Maggie, who is more intelligent than the ordinary people around her, and who wishes to fulfill her potential by leading a better existence, but ultimately is forced to surrender to society and to her conscience and commits suicide.

D. H. Lawrence reflects a woman that one could easily meet in real life in the second decade of the twentieth century in England. He writes at a later period than the other authors, he portrays more liberated woman. As a male writer, he records the phenomenon of suffragettes and feminism in the character of Clara Dawes, who lives independently, defends women's rights in public settings and conducts her love-life as she chooses. In a way, he portrays in her the conclusion of what the earlier women authors were wishing their heroines to achieve and chronologically is able to bring in the benefits of both the earlier women writers' works.

To conclude, the three women characters analyzed in this thesis – Shirley Keeldar, Maggie Tulliver and Clara Dawes – all defy existing social norms, perceptions about women and ideas about morality to some extent. Clara Dawes and Maggie Tulliver both reject society's morals. Clara does so to a greater degree as she has an affair with another man while married, but Maggie also is involved in such a rejection as she refuses to be forced into a marriage that society's morals impose upon her. And Shirley Keeldar is the one who most strongly rejects fixed perceptions about women as she believes the manners and authority of a man as an heiress.

This thesis therefore successfully shows how the portrayal of women changed over time. Where Shirley Keeldar understands that despite having money, the only way to survive in a patriarchal society is to toe the line; hence she agrees to get married. Maggie Tulliver in the next book fails to understand the tricks of survival in such a society and hence is forced to commit suicide, while Clara Dewes in the last novel completely rejects the dictates of society and follows her heart.

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